Individual Properties in Aristotle’s Categories

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1. At Categories 1 a 23-29,1 Aristotle marks off a set of items which are present in but not predicable of a subject. Thus, for example, a certain knowledge of grammar (ἡ τις γραμματική) is present in a subject, the soul, and a certain white (τὸ τί λευκόν) present in a subject, the body; but neither is predicable of a subject.

Such items are not predicable of a subject because they are particular or individual: ἡ τίς γραμματική and τὸ τί λευκόν parallel ὁ τίς ἄθρωπος and ὁ τίς ἔττος (1b4), which mean, respectively, ‘a particular man’ and ‘a particular horse’; and Aristotle, after remarking that nothing prevents what is individual and one in number from being present in a subject (1b7-8), cites as his example a certain knowledge of grammar. But what is individual and one in number is not predicable of a subject (1b6-7). However, not everything present in a subject is individual and one in number, for some things present in a subject are also predicable of a subject (1a29-1b3); thus for example knowledge is in a subject, the soul, and predicable of a subject, knowledge of grammar. These two sets of items, what is both predicable of and present in a subject, and what is present in but not predicable of a subject, correspond, respectively, to the genera or species of individuals in categories other than substance,2 and to the individuals themselves.3

What is present in a subject as individual and one in number is incapable of existing apart from the particular subject it is in; for at 1a24-25, Aristotle defines presence as follows: "By present in a subject I mean what is in something, not as a part, but as incapable of existing separately from what it is in." It would seem to follow from this that an item present in an individual subject is itself individual, and numerically distinct from items present in other individual subjects.

Suppose this is so. Then if there are two pieces of chalk, A and B,
and if they are of the same determinate shade of color, say, white, there will be a particular instance of white in A and a particular instance of white in B. Call those instances respectively s and t. Then s and t are the same in that they are instances of the same shade of color. But they are different in that they are themselves numerically different individuals, and this difference is to be explained by the fact that they are present in numerically different subjects: s is the white of A, and t is the white of B. Thus s and t are different members of the same species, the given shade of white, in a way precisely analogous to the way in which A and B are members of the same species, chalk. This situation will obtain generally in categories other than substance; that is, it will obtain, not only for qualities such as colors, but for sizes, shapes, places, times, and so on for any items present in but not predicable of a subject.

2. At least in outline, the foregoing interpretation of particular properties in the Categories has been widely accepted. But it has recently been challenged by Professor Owen.

Professor Owen agrees that items present in but not predicable of a subject are particular or individual, but holds that they are particular in being determinate in kind – in being, for example, particular shades of color, or particular sizes and shapes, and so forth. He therefore holds that the same individual property may be found in many subjects (p. 99):

To say that (a particular shade of pink) is a particular colour is to say that it, or its name, cannot be predicated: it is not to say that it cannot be found in more than one subject. Any particular shade of colour is of course reproducible. Any bit of linguistic knowledge can of course lodge in more than one head. Aristotle does not for a moment contemplate denying this. His commentators saddle him with the denial.

Specific identity in categories other than substance, then, implies numerical identity: given two pieces of chalk, A and B, and given that A and B are of exactly the same shade of white, then the white in A is one and the same as the white in B. This has been doubted, Professor


32